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THE CORN HARVEST CEREMONY

xaskwi·'mi· la"keyɔ'k·an, "CORN CEREMONY"

The Delawares celebrated the conclusion of the corn or maize bearing season with a festival of thanksgiving in which acknowledgement was made to mother Corn for the blessings of abundance, and an appeal made for the continuation of health, a form of blessing never forgotten for a moment by Delaware supplicants. The ceremony has analogies among all the eastern tribes, the underlying elements of worship being much the same all over the area of the maize complex. The Delaware festival is not preserved for us in rich detail unfortunately. The following notes on its procedures and the religious sentiments involved seem to be all that we have on record. Wi·tapano'xwe expresses himself in the text to the full extent of his knowledge on this important celebration. 796x

While the speech-making and feasting seem to follow the usual Delaware type of feasting rite, a particular feature appears in the manner in which the Corn anniversary is announced among the people a week or so before it takes place. This feature amounts to a formalistic procedure. In this performance two messengers dressed in suits of corn-husk clothing and wearing masks with corn husk "hair" ride through the Delaware settlements as a signal that the ceremony will soon occur. But they enact a strange symbol. Carrying a small quantity of excrement in a side pouch they smear the substance upon the persons of those they encounter en route who do not offer them at once a gift no matter how trifling. We shall hear of the strange practice in the texts to follow. The purpose of this punishment for disregard of the obligation toward the messengers seems to lie in the motive of enforcing obedience and even fear in case of refusal to comply with the exacting demands of tradition in regard to religious duties among the Delawares. This note of fidelity to ancient customs is dominant in the minds of the conserva- 796x 514●

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tives, and the founders of these rites, whoever they were, seem to have made suitable provision against public indifference. In the words of the informant, no one is apt to disregard the call to obey religious custom in view of the consequences. And there may have been some idea of making an offering to mother Corn as well in this rite. Its origin dates from the first conception of the corn ceremony as the text relates.[1] The individuals whose duty it is to enact this part are hence called "excrement daubers," and their identity is, as might naturally be expected, kept in the dark. The rite itself is called *we'mui·ha'lɔwe's* "excrement daubing."

Of the masks used in this rite we have mention of several specimens obtained from *Ni·ka'ni·paxoxwe*, "Leading walker" (Joe Washington) of the same band in Oklahoma (Fig. 1, *A* and *B*).[2] They represent the features of masks requisitioned in the rites of the Corn Harvest Ceremony as celebrated by the Wolf division. According to the memory of Joe Washington, from whom they were obtained, the mask (*A*) with black on the forehead and chin part and the middle face-portion of red, was employed by the mask messenger and dancer of the Wolf division in his *midday* appearances. The dark upper and lower bands of color represent darkness before dawn and after sunset; the lighter center, the middle of the day. The other (*B*) with the upper face area black and the lower red was worn in the rites of the *early morning and evening*.

The corn ceremony itself seems to be known only through general description on the part of our informant who had the account of it from his mother. She had seen the rite when she was young. As will be seen its characteristics are those of the usual Delaware feasting festivals. There are the addresses by the speaker chosen for the occasion, the women having prepared beforehand the amount of hominy

[1] One of the Delaware authorities, J. A. Parks, states in recent correspondence that he thinks the "excrement dauber" rite belonged originally to the Shawnee. Joe Washington, who had witnessed the rite when a young man, attributes the custom to the Seneca "introduced a long time ago to the Delawares."

[2] Specimen *A* (model, 4½ x 5½ inches) is of oak with cap portion, over top and back, of trimmed deer skin, with shredded corn stalk "hair." *B* is similar in construction, 6 x 8 inches. Unlike Iroquois masks there are no little bags of tobacco offering attached to Delaware images.